

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

“War Horse”, Other Animal Warriors and the Veterinarians Who Cared for Them

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
June 11, 2013

A million horses and mules lost their lives to starvation, disease and trauma during the War between States. The role of veterinary care was eventually considered a priority and each cavalry regiment was assigned a veterinarian. Attention to animal health in wartime continued through the Spanish American Conflict. Just before the onset of US involvement in WWI, Congress established the US Army Veterinary Corps and veterinarians were commissioned as officers.

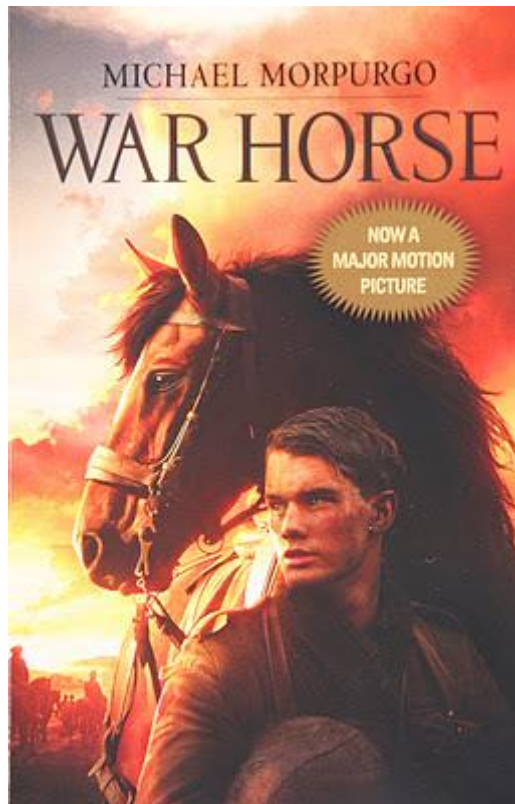
Since that time, horses, mules, dogs, and other animals have contributed to war efforts and veterinarians have played an essential role in ensuring that the animals be treated and cared for in the best possible manner while accomplishing their assigned tasks.

Though written for children, Michael Morpurgo’s best-selling book, *War Horse*, helps us understand the massive loss of animal life in the history of war. In his story set in Europe during WWI, Morpurgo humanizes the plight of military animals by making the horse, whose name is Joey, the narrator of his own story. His experience is so compelling that it was transformed into a Tony-Award-winning Broadway play that ran almost two years, finishing in New York City this past January. And on Christmas day, 2011, Stephen Spielberg’s adaptation hit the big screen.

Joey is a British boy’s beloved work horse who is sold into the British cavalry in 1914, eventually crossing the channel into France where he carries a leading British officer into battle. Following a failed cavalry charge into German machine gun encampments, Joey is captured by the enemy and is forced to pull heavy artillery into battle for the German war machine. During the Battle of the Somme, he narrowly misses death from an oncoming tank. Racing alone and frightened through a no-man’s land he becomes hopelessly entangled in barbed wire. He faces almost certain death before being discovered and cut free from his ensnarement by English and German soldiers working together to spare the life of this warrior horse.

When the fighting ceased, Joey’s plight as a surviving horse on French soil is also chronicled as he and his emaciated equine comrades are auctioned for slaughter as horse meat. Though we instinctively imagine that the millions of horses lost in World War I would have been through

combat, Morpurgo paints a more accurate picture where malnutrition, starvation and disease (and slaughter) were the greater scourges.

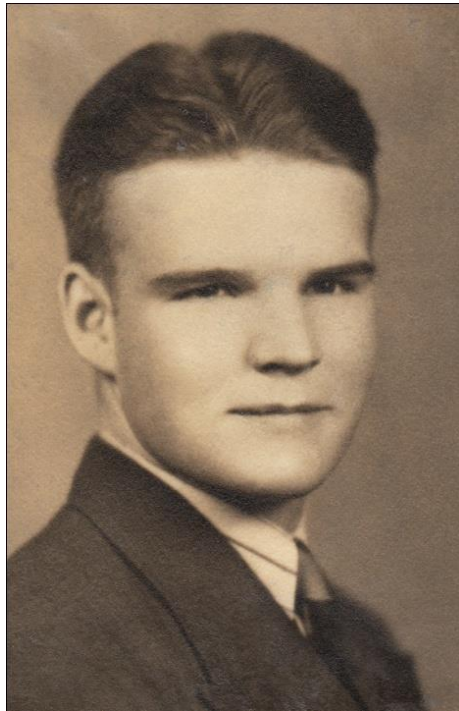


Cover of 2007 edition of Michael Morpurgo's book, War Horse.
(Photo by the author).

This characterization of war animals as “equipment” was repeated in WWII and in later wars. At the end of Vietnam War, American military dogs that had served so faithfully to locate injured GIs, to warn of enemy ambushes, and to search out booby traps, were left to their own fate—including slaughter for food—as troops were forced to abandon their companions when they returned to the United States.

From a medical standpoint, Joey’s near fatal encounter with tetanus following his recovery from combat injuries is a vivid reminder that horses are highly susceptible to this dreaded infection. American veterinarian, Dr. D. L. Proctor, was in India during WW II and was in charge of preparing horses and mules for service in the mountains and jungles of Burma. He told me of the problems with protozoan diseases, lacerations and shrapnel wounds.

But as far as tetanus went, Dr. Proctor said that things had changed in the 35 years since WWI. “I never saw a case of tetanus while I was in the service because the horses and mules were all vaccinated,” he said. “And this is something because tetanus was the greatest cause of death in horses at that time.”¹



*Dr. Delano L. Proctor, DVM, DACVS (deceased 2009),
was assigned to the Army Veterinary Corps in India during WWII.
He prepared mules for the China-Burma-India theatre.*
(© Cornell University)

What *War Horse* tells us is that animals don't discriminate between the "good" side and the "bad" side. Joey fought for both armies and received veterinary care from each side. In both the Broadway play and the book, the emphasis on Joey's health is a subtext of the story. The critical service of both British and German veterinarians and veterinary stations are described many times throughout the book.

This higher-order of veterinarians with regard to care for war animals was affirmed in November 2011 when I traveled to Japan to interview the man I believe was the last surviving Japanese WWII veterinarian to transport horses to Burma for battle against the British and American forces in the China-Burma-India campaign. Though at the time he was enemy to the Allied forces, Dr. Takehiko Takahashi, cared for the horses assigned to his charge with the same zeal and compassion as Dr. Proctor and others did for the American mules and horses.

Animals are still fighting and suffering in war. *The New York Times* ran an article in late 2011 that captures one aspect of the modern day impact of war on dogs. Titled "After Duty, Dogs Suffer Like Soldiers"² James Dao describes the post-traumatic stress disorder of military dogs in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Veterinarians take an oath to prevent animal suffering. In war or in peacetime, the level of care our four-legged warriors receive should not depend on where they were born or which side leads them into theatre of war.

¹ Proctor Delano L, (retired veterinarian, Lexington KY, deceased 2009) interview with Donald F Smith (Cornell University), 2007 Dec 18. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/17796>

² http://www.google.com/webhp?source=search_app#output=search&sclient=psy-ab&q=after+duty+dogs+suffer+like+soldiers&oq=after+duty&gs_l=hp.1.0.0i0i22i30l3.1144.6141.0.8453.18.11.4.3.3.0.124.990.9j2.11.0...0.0.0..1c.1.16.psy-ab.rW22zovpJ6E&pbx=1&bav=on.2.or.r_qf.&bvm=bv.47534661,d.dmg&fp=e999e0918699865e&biw=1280&bih=699

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
War Horse
Dogs in War
Delano L. Proctor
Takehiko Takahashi
Army Veterinary Corps
Animals in Combat
Human-Animal Bond
World War I
World War II
China-Burma-India Theatre

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.